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BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: ITS HISTORY AND ITS MISSION.

II.

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THE principle of Gabler began to bear fruit early in this century in biblical theological studies of individual authors or groups of authors. Thus Usteri presented the teaching of Paul in 1832, Frommann that of John in 1839, and Messner that of the apostles in 1856.

These writers and the large number of others who have continued their line of investigation have brought out with hitherto unknown clearness the rich variety of Scripture; and while they have helped to destroy that idea of the unity of the Bible which prevailed before the Reformation, they have helped to demonstrate a true divine unity in which the different types are comprehended. Passing over the works of Schmid¹ and Hahn² we come to what must be regarded as the best fruits thus far of the principle of Gabler, namely, the New Testament theology of Bernhard Weiss, 1868, (Fourth edition, 1895) and Willibald Beyschlag, 1891, and the Old Testament theology of Hermann Schultz, 1869, G. F. Oehler, 1873, and the fourth edition of Schultz, 1892. With these writers, as with Gabler, biblical theology is a purely historical science. They distinguish sharply between biblical theology and systematized evangelical doctrine, holding that these differ both in form and in content. "Biblical theology is neither apologetic nor polemic, but objective and impartial (Schaff). "It does not demonstrate, it narrates" (Reuss). They recognize development in the religious and moral teachings of Scripture, and the importance of individual types.

¹ *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 1853.

² *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 1854.

These works represent the best that has thus far been accomplished in the sphere of biblical theology. They are not to be regarded as ideal and final. They have manifest defects; and furthermore it is probable that each new age, if it is alive to God, will call for a new presentation of revealed truth. But of works covering the whole of either Testament these that have been mentioned register the high-water mark of scientific biblical theology.

It will be noticed that the development of this science as far as sketched has been wholly by Germans, and also that I have considered only the important *books* that have been produced. The first point scarcely needs any qualification. With the exception of Reuss' work and the recent able book by Jules Bovon¹ the foreign literature is German. And little original work in the English language has as yet been contributed.² But we must not stop with the literature. It is a fact of great significance that biblical theology as a distinct scientific discipline is being taught in our theological seminaries. In 1881 a writer in the *Bibliotheca Sacra* could say that in twenty of our leading seminaries there was not a single chair of biblical theology. Now it might be difficult to find a well equipped seminary in which biblical theology is not accorded a place, and a considerable number of our best institutions have distinct chairs for this department. So Union, Andover, Hartford, Yale, McCormick and others. The establishment of these chairs is a recognition of the abiding scientific value of biblical theology, and the existence of each one of them is a fact of greater importance for the growth and usefulness of biblical theology than almost any separate contribution to the literature of the subject.

One aspect of the history of biblical theology still remains to be considered. I have spoken briefly of the origin and development of this latest theological science. It has been said that it was a true child of the principles of the Reformation. It must

¹ *Théologie du Nouveau Testament*, 1893.

² We have in America the two books by Stevens, *The Pauline Theology*, and *The Johannine Theology*.

not, however, be supposed that the preparation for it was completed with the enunciation of those principles. Rather must we say that the preparation which was begun by the Reformers has been deepened and widened in a remarkable manner by the biblical study of the last hundred years, and that this preparation is still going forward. All the true progress which has been made in the criticism of the text of Scripture, all the progress made in the higher or literary criticism of the Bible, all the established results gained from the study of the history contemporary with the biblical ages, all the progress made in the philological investigation of the languages of the Bible—all these results are directly or indirectly tributary to the science of biblical theology. It presupposes all these lines of study. *Their* progress involves its progress. It could not exist as a science without them. Hence all successful laborers in these departments have been furthering the interests of a scientific biblical theology, and it may well be that some of these laborers have done more to promote biblical theology than many who have worked in this special department. In this work of building foundations England and America have had their part no less than Germany. Of the American scholars whose names might be mentioned with praise, one deserves especial notice. This scholar was, so far as I can learn, the first among us to lecture on biblical theology, which he did as early at least as 1883. He was not only the pioneer in this work but he has contributed to it indirectly by numerous scientific writings on the literary origin and character of the Old Testament Scriptures. He has contributed to it also by vigorous polemic against unsound principles of interpretation and against unscriptural teachings in his own denomination. I refer, of course, to the one who is accused of having so troubled the Presbyterian Israel in the last few years, but who might truthfully reply to the ultra-conservative element therein, "I have not troubled Israel but thou and thy father's house." Professor Briggs' work, as compared with that of his accusers, must be admitted to be far more scientific and scriptural.

From this historical sketch we pass on to consider briefly the second part of our theme—the *mission* of biblical theology. The

importance of this discipline, which is for Christians logically implied in the fact that it is a scientific presentation of the teaching of God's word, is recognized by competent students and is rated very high. Thus Grau¹ says: "Biblical theology is in my judgment the most important organ of the present day for drawing real water of life from that source from which alone it can be had, both for the Church which is desirous of new spiritual power, and for dogmatics which thirsts for new sources and principles." And Dr. Schaff thinks that "biblical theology should be the guiding star in all departments of sacred learning, a focus of light in theological study."² "Biblical theology," says Hermann Schultz, "is as it were the heart of theological science, which by working on the original sources, gathers the life-blood into one great center in order to pour it back again into the veins, so that the theological life of the existing church may be kept strong and healthy."³ Dr. Orr in his "Christian View of God and the World" refers to New Testament theology as a recently founded science which has already attained to a position of *commanding importance* among the theological disciplines. These testimonies need not be multiplied, but I proceed at once to ask why biblical theology is thus exalted. What is its mission? But before attempting to answer this question, let me again bring to our mind the definition of biblical theology. It is the historical presentation of the moral and religious teachings of the Bible—*historical* in contrast to dogmatic or systematic. The word *historical* implies the recognition of development, if there is development, and the differences of individual types, if there are such differences. *Historical presentation* implies that we assume as far as possible the point of view of the different biblical writers, that we observe the proportions which they give to their respective teachings, and that we state the facts as we find them.⁴

There has been and still is not a little misunderstanding in regard to what is meant by biblical theology. Thus *The Inde-*

¹ In *Zöckler's Handbuch der theol. Wissenschaften*, p. 614, note.

² *Theological Propædæutic*, p. 318.

³ *Biblische theologie des Alten Testaments*, 1892.

⁴ See James Drummond, *Introduction to the Study of Theology*, 1884.

pendent of January 29, 1891, defines biblical theology as follows: "By biblical theology we understand theology directly derived from the Bible, resting upon it, proved by it, and accepted because there taught." Plainly this *understanding*, judged by the history of the science, is mainly a misunderstanding. Nor is the statement of James Stalker¹ in an excellent article published in 1890 wholly right. He says that "Biblical theology undertakes to show that there is in the Bible a gradual development of revelation, preceding by slow and sure stages from the earliest to the latest books. It undertakes to exhibit this development from book to book, or at least from group to group of books." Now it is true that as a result of biblical study a gradual development of revelation has been established, but biblical theology does not undertake to show that there *is* such a development in the Bible from book to book. If it started out to demonstrate that point, or if it started out to prove from the Bible any assumption, it would cease to be a historical science. The claim of biblical theology is that it does not undertake to prove anything. This is its great merit. It simply asks after facts. If it finds development, it states it; but were it to undertake to *prove* that there is development, it would cease to be historical and become dogmatic.

What, then, is the mission of biblical theology as thus understood? First, it has a mission in relation to the *Bible*. In the words of Dr. Schaff already quoted, biblical theology brings us face to face with the divine oracles in all their original power and freshness. It is indeed able to do this, because it takes up into itself all that has been gained by the scientific study of the text and presents the teaching in its entirety,—presents it as nearly as possible as it existed in the mind of the respective authors.² It is then the last and highest work of the interpreter. Teaching that lies scattered in books of law and prophecy, in histories, poems and epistles, is presented in its variety and unity, stamped with the individuality of its different authors, and set in the light of the different ages in which it was promulgated.

¹ See *Magazine of Christian Literature*, May 1890.

² See Wendt in *Lehre Jesu, Zweiter Theil*, p. 3.

Biblical theology has done much in bringing out into strong relief on the background of a national Jewish literature, the individuality of lawgiver, prophets, kings, and apostles, and the distinctive types of doctrine which they represented. Biblical theology has helped to bring out the *development* of revelation, and to mark its various stages. It has helped to an appreciation of the human element in the Bible, which must indeed be appreciated in order to a true appreciation of the divine element. Biblical theology has helped to exalt the Bible, by showing how through all this vast and varied literature one increasing divine purpose runs—the purpose of redemption.

This mission of biblical theology in relation to the Bible is only partially fulfilled, and the need of it will probably always exist.

But again, biblical theology has a mission in relation to *systematic theology*. This is the twofold mission of Jeremiah, to pluck up and break down, to build and to plant. Biblical theology cannot be directly destructive of error in the teachings of the church; that is, it cannot be polemic, citing and refuting unscriptural views, for thus it would cease to be historical. But it can remove erroneous teaching by the quiet and more effectual way of presenting the truth. It is its mission so to do. The systematic theology of Augustine was as scriptural as the exegesis of that time could have demanded, but the exegesis was very deficient. The theology of Calvin and the other reformers was as scriptural as the exegesis of their day could have demanded, and as a whole is admitted to have been more scriptural than the theology of Augustine. But biblical criticism began with the reformers, and as we now know it was impossible that they should do more than make a beginning in it. Now the systematic theology of the early church and of the reformers has been largely conserved unto this present day, while exegetical knowledge of the Word of God is vastly more accurate and complete now than in any preceding century. It seems to be true that the current systematic theology of Protestantism is not as scriptural either in what it affirms or what it does not affirm as the exegesis of our time demands. It must then, as

one has said, be rectified and fructified by being led back to the fountain-head of revealed truth. To take a single illustration of the need of this. "Calvinism, according to one of the most honored Presbyterian teachers of our time,¹ starts from a double predestination which antedates creation, and is the divine programme as it were of history. This programme includes the successive stages of a universal fall, a partial redemption and salvation, and a partial reprobation and damnation." Thus, it is admitted, that the doctrine of divine decrees is the central and dominant fact in Calvinism. But is it central and dominant in the Word of God? On the contrary, we must say that the great majority of the writers of the Bible, if interrogated regarding this point, reply that they are wholly ignorant of such a doctrine. Even Paul repudiates it. The Bible would have to be entirely re-written in order to give the doctrine of decrees the place and prominence which Calvin claimed for it. It stands in the dim background of Scripture, when it appears at all; but here is a system of theology in which it is central.

Now it is the mission of biblical theology to furnish the weapons of truth with which errors in existing dogmatics, where there are such, may be destroyed, and to co-work, in the most friendly way, with systematic theology in the construction of a system of doctrine which shall speak when the Bible speaks, and be silent when the Bible is silent; which shall speak aloud where the Bible speaks aloud, and shall speak gently where the Bible speaks gently; which shall regard the *proportions* of revealed truth in the Bible as themselves a part of the permanent teaching of God; a system which shall be scriptural first and speculative afterward, if at all, and which shall scrupulously refrain from prefixing to its speculative deliverances a "Thus saith the Lord;" a system which, if so unfortunate as to bear the name of any man, shall yet be recognized by ordinary people as having a divine right to be called scriptural; and a system, finally, which, though in the fuller light of advancing years it may be found to be *less* than biblical shall never be discovered to be *anti-biblical*.

¹See SCHAFF, in *Andover Review*, 1892.

Systematic theologians cannot, of course, be expected to take blindly whatever is offered to them by biblical theology, but they will be willing to take facts, or show in open field that what are claimed to be facts are not. They will take the gathered fruits of biblical theology, maintaining, however, their own independence, as the laborer in biblical theology, though working independently, looks for help to the various earlier departments of exegetical study.

Thirdly and lastly, biblical theology has a mission to *Christian life*. This is implied, indeed, in the statement that its aim is to interpret Scripture, for whatever helps to interpret Scripture adds to the moral and religious forces that are abroad; and it is implied also in its mission to systematic theology, for whatever helps systematic theology will, in the end, be helpful to common Christian life; but it is right that the bearing of biblical theology on Christian life should be a little more fully stated.

Christian life is not supported *by* a book, but it is supported very largely *through* a book, by the Spirit of God. That book is a divine literature which blossomed through ten centuries, and the separate books of that literature must be interpreted, as one has said, from their center, and no longer from a small section of their circumference.¹

Biblical theology seeks thus to interpret the separate books and authors, and to rise from this to a synthesis of the entire Old Testament and of the entire New Testament, and then, finally, to a synthesis of the entire revelation of Scripture.

The existence of such a method of study among the religious teachers of a people is of incalculable value. The formation of this habit of looking at Scripture as a whole means ultimately largeness and simplicity of conceptions regarding the great themes of life.

But biblical theology fosters not only a knowledge of the ranges of Scripture in their entirety, but it fosters also the historical method of study, which is the distinguishing characteristic of modern exegesis as compared with the early and mediæval. The value of this to Christian life cannot be estimated. The

¹ BRIGGS, in *Whither*, 1890.

historical method of studying the Bible brings God very near; the allegorical method puts him far away. The historical method puts facts beneath our feet for us to stand upon; the allegorical method put there fancies as changeful and as insubstantial as mists at sunrise.

Biblical theology, because historical, is, in its completed form, christological, but while it recognizes that the needle of all Scripture points toward the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, it does not confuse the reality with the shadow, and identify the end with the beginning. It does not say with Augustine, using the words as he used them, that the New Testament is concealed in the Old and the Old revealed in the New. It sees rather that Jesus is greater than the temple, more glorious than any vision that was flashed on the spirit of prophets in their most exalted states of divine communion, and that the kingdom of Jesus far transcends not only the separate foregleams of its coming, but also the total conception of all Old Testament prophecy. Hence a part of the mission of biblical theology to Christian life is to restore the historical perspective in which writers and periods should appear in their providential relation to Christ, and to cultivate the habit of estimating all Scripture by the central fact of all.

We see Moses and Elijah, yea, also Peter and James and John, on the Mount with Jesus, who is permanently transfigured, and we recognize as divine the voice which says regarding the Son, *Hear ye him*.

This great mission of biblical theology to the Bible, to systematic theology, and to Christian life will probably be fulfilled in divers ways and slowly, but we may believe that an increasing fulfilment is certainly to be accomplished, and that out of the Scripture, better understood and better loved, the Lord Jesus will be continually going forth conquering and to conquer.